National Park Service

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail

Historical Background

Slavery ended in 1865 but it took another century for African Americans to win their rights in citizenship. White resistance in the South succeeded in turning back the brief gains made by African Americans during Reconstruction. By limiting the franchise, white politicians removed black voters from the electorate, enshrining their defense of white supremacy in the Alabama Constitution of 1901 and other southern states. Years of struggle against disenfranchisement culminated in massive protests in 1965. The violent suppression by state authorities in Selma resulted in federal support for a Second Reconstruction. With the passage by the United States Congress of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, African Americans in Alabama and across the South again registered to vote and participated in elections.

In 1965 the population of Dallas County, Alabama, was majority black but only 325 blacks were registered to vote, compared to 9,700 registered whites. Voter ratios in surrounding Black Belt counties were similar—or much worse. Although legislation to extend the right to vote to blacks had been signed into law by President Eisenhower in 1957, black voting power in Selma and throughout the South remained virtually unchanged from the time of the Jim Crow southern state constitutions adopted between 1880 and 1920.

Alabama passed a law in 1893 known as the Sayre law. This law required that voters seeking assistance in the polls swear an oath to the inspectors that they were unable to write the English language, and once inside the voting booth, they were limited to five minutes. The Sayre law technically allowed illiterate African Americans to vote, but in truth, after swearing to their illiteracy, they were provided with aid in the form of poll workers who ensured that the votes were placed in accord with white supremacists' wishes.

The Alabama Legislature was not satisfied with the 1893 law, and in the 1901 constitutional convention, passed a number of voter qualification laws specifically intended to disfranchise the black citizens of the state. Also included in the laws was a list of registration and voting disqualifications that included "idiots and insane persons" or those convicted of a crime or vagrancy.

Jim Crow laws across the South systematically excluded poor whites and most blacks from the voter rolls by requiring that they pass a literacy test and pay a poll tax. In most southern states there was legislation known as the "understanding clause" that allowed prospective voters who could not pass the literacy test to vote if they could demonstrate their understanding of the meaning of a passage of the constitution to the satisfaction of the registrar. The "grandfather clause," also passed by state legislatures in the South, allowed men to vote if they could prove that they voted in 1867 or were descended from someone who was eligible to vote in 1867, the year before blacks were given the right to vote. Alabama's "grandfather clause," rather than requiring previous voting rights, referred instead to anyone who had fought or was descended from someone who had fought honorably for the United States in the war of 1812, the war with Mexico, any war with the Indians, the war between the states, or the war with Spain, or who served in Confederate States' forces or State of Alabama forces in the war between

the states.

In the April 23, 1901 Alabama election on the question of holding a constitutional convention, there were 45,505 votes against the call for a convention, out of a total of 115,810 votes cast. Following the statewide vote for a convention, the delegates convened at the state capitol on May 21, 1901, to rewrite the Alabama State Constitution.

John Knox of Calhoun County presided and delivered the opening remarks:

> *Gentlemen of the Convention:*
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> *I thank you for the high honor you have conferred in electing me to preside over the deliberations of this convention. Viewed from the standpoint of my profession, to which, up to this moment, my life's work has been devoted, it is a great honor, indeed; for I know of no higher honor that can be conferred upon a lawyer than to be made President of the Constitutional Convention, which represents the sovereignty of his people; and numbers among its delegates, in large part, the intellect and talent of the State—those who have in the past, and will in the future exert a potent influence in shaping and directing the affairs of the State.*
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> *In my judgment, the people of Alabama have been called upon to face no more important situation than now confronts us, unless it be when they, in 1861, stirred by the momentous issue of impending conflict between the North and the South, were forced to decide whether they would remain in or withdraw from the Union. Then, as now, the negro was the prominent factor in the issue.*
>
> *The Southern people, with this grave problem of the races to deal with, are face to face with a new epoch in Constitution-making, the difficulties of which are great, but which, if solved wisely, may bring rest and peace and happiness. If otherwise, it may leave us and our posterity continuously involved in race conflict, or what may be worse, subjected permanently to the baneful influences of the political conditions now prevailing in the State.*

The Alabama Constitution of 1901 was carefully crafted by the wealthy landowners and industrialists who dominated the convention. It restricted voting considerably, but it avoided triggering federal intervention. Most of the voting provisions were not overturned by the federal courts until the 1960s.

Prior to Alabama's adoption of its 1901 constitution, African Americans had actively participated in the political process and even won seats in the U.S. Congress. Benjamin Turner, credited with saving the Saint James Hotel in Selma from destruction by Union forces, was elected to the House of Representatives in 1870. James Rapier was elected to the House of Representatives in 1873. Between 1870 and 1877 Jeremiah Haralson was elected to the state senate, the state house of representatives, and the U.S. Congress. The Alabama Constitution of 1901, with its poll taxes, literacy requirements, and greatly increased power of local voter registrars, ended all hopes of black political involvement.

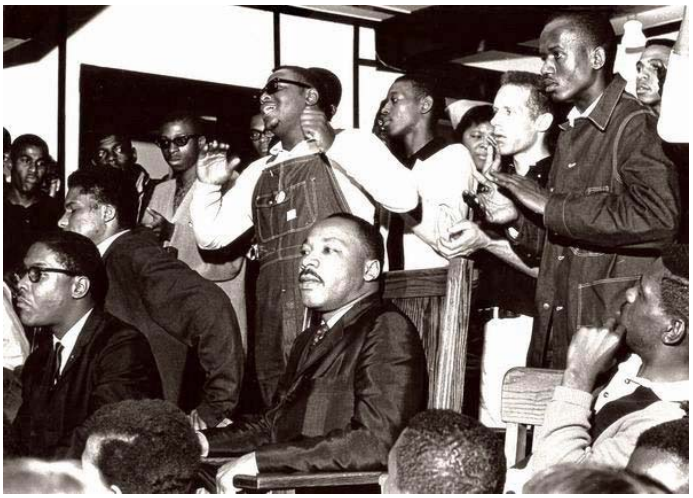
Booker T. Washington was a major black opponent of the proposed new constitution, and wrote eloquently and pleadingly to the delegates of the convention: http://www.archives.state.al.us/teacher/ccon/lesson3/doc1.html http://www.archives.state.al.us/teacher/ccon/lesson3/doc2.html Washington's eloquence and the opposition of many blacks, poor whites, union labor, and the Alabama remnants of the Populist Movement did little to prevent the adoption of the 1901 constitution, which won largely because of massive voter fraud in the Black Belt of central Alabama. In majority-black Macon County, home of Tuskegee Institute, 1,074 votes were cast in favor of the new constitution that Booker T. Washington had argued so passionately against. Only 190 were cast opposing it. In majority-black Dallas and Perry counties, the votes in favor were 8,125 to 235 and 3,209 to 88 respectively. The constitution passed statewide 57 percent to 43 percent. The Alabama Constitution of 1901 was declared ratified in a proclamation by Governor W.D. Jelks.

In 1902, the Alabama Democratic Party limited the right to vote in its primary to white males. It was not until 1944 that the Supreme Court outlawed white primaries. Alabama then adopted the Boswell Amendment, requiring a voter applicant to demonstrate a satisfactory understanding of a section of the United States Constitution. In 1951, the Alabama Constitution was amended to restrict voter registration to those who were of "good character" and who could read and write an article of the United States Constitution.

Blacks who dared to challenge the system were often beaten, fired from their jobs, mutilated, or even killed.

Change came slowly, but was hastened by the Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954 and by the success of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, blacks in the Deep South continued to wage war against segregation and all it stood for.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained strength in the early 1960s, black residents of Selma and nearby Marion, Alabama, demonstrated for the right to vote. Bernard Lafayette, a young seminarian and a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, came to Selma in 1963 to help blacks exercise their right to vote. Lafayette's efforts in Selma were described by many as a "waste of time." Years of oppression had whipped most of the blacks in Selma and Dallas counties into submission. Lafayette met opposition at every turn, even from black people who did not want to make the white people angry by registering to vote. He found helping black folk overcome decades of fear and intimidation his greatest problem in Selma. Despite his best efforts, he achieved little measurable success. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) remained actively involved with grassroots organizers in an effort to challenge the existing laws and get blacks registered to vote. The local leaders, known as the Courageous Eight, were Ulysses Blackmon; Amelia Boynton; Earnest L. Doyle; Marie Foster; James Edward Gildersleeve; Rev. Henry Shannon, Jr.; Rev. J.D. Hunter; and Rev. Frederick D. Reese. The fact that Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark met the demonstrators with threats and violence only added to the complexity of trying to get black citizens to register to vote. Local white resistance was strong, and in January of 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were invited to come to Selma and join the local demonstrators.



Martin Luther King Jr., James Farmer, and others meet in the Beulah Baptist Church, Montgomery, prior to Bloody Sunday.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution clearly states, "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." In many places in Alabama, however, the Constitution and all it stands for took a backseat to "home rule." A case in point is Marion, Alabama.

In the evening of February 18, 1965, Rev. C.T. Vivian and Rev. Willie Lee Bolden traveled from Selma to Marion, Alabama, to speak at a rally at the Zion Methodist Church. Rev. Vivian gave the opening remarks, encouraging the crowd with personal testimony regarding how he had stood up to Sheriff Clark in Selma. His confrontation with Sheriff Clark was captured on film and broadcast on the evening news.

The keynote speech by Rev. Bolden so motivated the congregation that they decided to march one block from the church to the Perry County Courthouse to protest the earlier arrest of James Orange, a movement organizer. This decision to march at night was an extremely dangerous move. It was the general policy of movement leaders to never hold demonstrations at night because too many things could go wrong in the dark. People who were at the church that night and who later participated in Bloody Sunday say that, as horrible as Bloody Sunday was, it did not compare to the violence that took place in Marion on February 18, 1965.

Urged on by the messages they had just heard, the congregation progressed from uncertainty and fear to strong feelings of pride, determination, and hope for their march. Before they could exit the church, however, state troopers and their citizen deputies stormed the building and literally beat the people out of the church and into the street, where they were met with unrestrained violence.

To ensure that their deeds were covered by darkness and unrecorded, the streetlights were suddenly cut off. Newspaper reporters were beaten, camera lenses were sprayed with black paint, and the lights attached to cameras carried by reporters were broken with billy clubs because they "blinded the deputies." The people were beaten and started running in all directions to escape the onslaught of violence. Some of them even ran to a nearby funeral home and hid inside caskets. Others were not so lucky. Jimmie Lee Jackson, a Vietnam veteran and a church deacon, was at Mack's Café behind the church. He heard the commotion and

ventured out to see the cause of the noise. He found his mother, Viola Jackson, and his grandfather, Cager Lee, in the crowd being attacked by law enforcement officers. Jimmie Lee rushed to protect them and they all sought refuge in the café, but the deputies followed them. During the confrontation that followed, Jackson was shot in the stomach by a state trooper. He was then taken to jail. Only much later that night was he taken to Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma, where he died seven days later. Many of the reporters and cameramen required medical attention. Obtaining medical care in Marion was not an option. The television stations and the newspapers that the reporters represented, complained vigorously to state leaders about the treatment of their reporters. The state in return offered a weak apology but basically said that the reporters "got what they deserved." Very little attention was given to the fact that black citizens were also beaten and that Jimmie Lee Jackson had been shot.

Jackson's death and the continuing denial of basic human and civil rights outraged the local community. Local activists suggested taking his body to the capitol to present it to Governor Wallace, as a show of their utter frustration with a system where people were denied basic rights and treated as disposable objects. Jackson was eventually laid to rest near Marion, but the idea of marching to Montgomery had been firmly planted in the minds of the people.

Media Influence

The role of the media changed public opinion regarding Civil Rights. Movement leaders kept the media informed of their plans, and the media kept the struggle before the people. Having learned the lesson of the power of the media from Civil Rights campaigns in Montgomery and Birmingham, Civil Rights leaders in Selma kept their story leads out, and the cameras and the reporters followed. As long as cameras were present, demonstrators were assured that, to some degree, they would be protected from unrestrained hatred and violence. For much of the twentieth century, Civil Rights stories were often buried deep inside newspapers, but during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, they were reported every day and often given front page coverage. The fact that the world was watching and clearly saw that the nation's rhetoric about freedom did not match its actions added to the urgency to make the American promise a reality for all citizens.

Rumors of a march to the capitol filtered through to the media. Members of the press had been in Selma for days waiting for something to happen. On March 5, 1965, Dr. King had an opportunity to talk with President Johnson about the conditions in Selma. After meeting with the President, Dr. King left Washington for Atlanta in order to deliver a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church on Sunday, March 7.

Because Dr. King was not in Selma, it appeared that Sunday, March 7, 1965, was going to be a slow news day. Some of the organizers wanted to postpone the march until Dr. King had returned to Selma. After much discussion, the movement leaders who remained in Selma decided to proceed with plans for the march. Leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were reluctant to participate because the plans were not well organized. They decided not to endorse the march. John Lewis of SNCC, however, decided to participate. He wanted to represent SNCC because the organization had been involved in the Selma struggle for years. He and some of the other college students did not want to surrender their role in Selma to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Meanwhile, SCLC leaders decided to draw straws to determine who would represent their organization as a march leader. The lot fell to Hosea Williams. Lewis and Williams prepared to lead the marchers out of Selma.

With the leaders in place and the foot soldiers ready to receive their orders, the marchers left Brown Chapel AME Church on their way to Montgomery to present their petition for the right to vote to Governor George Corley Wallace. Little did they know that they were marching into history and that their actions would inspire the world.

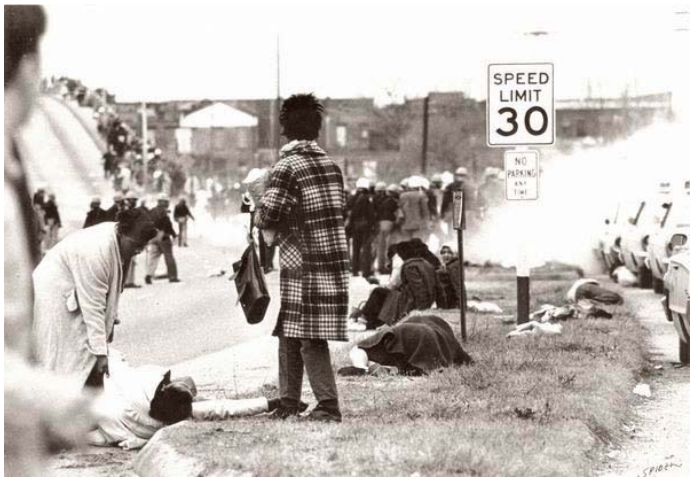
Only blocks from the church, the Alabama River curved around downtown Selma. Along the entire route to the river, the marchers were met by white hecklers hurling insults and mocking them, but they were not deterred.

Rebel flag and hecklers confront the marchers.

The route to Montgomery from Selma was across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and east on Highway 80, about 54 miles to the state capitol. The bridge, just outside downtown Selma, arched high over the Alabama River. As the marchers reached the crest of the Edmund Pettus Bridge they saw a large force of Alabama State Troopers and local deputies, heavily armed and equipped with riot gear. The road was blocked by state cruisers and state troopers, with the deputies behind them mounted on horseback. Some officers carried whips, clubs, or electric cattle prods. All of the officers carried tear gas masks. Major Jim Cloud of the Alabama State Troopers gave the marchers two minutes to turn around. Before the time elapsed, however, he commanded the troops to advance. In a matter of seconds the law enforcement officers turned March 7, 1965, into "Bloody Sunday."

Hosea Williams and John Lewis confront troopers on Bloody Sunday.

As the confrontation took place, the three major television stations and several newspaper photographers captured the attack on film. It was reported verbally on the radio and as a news flash on television, but without graphic images. The American Broadcasting Company rushed their film footage to Montgomery where it was developed. It was then flown to New York so that it could be aired nationally. Later that night the Sunday night movie, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, was interrupted by a news flash. Americans from the comfort of their living rooms watched in horror and disbelief as fellow citizens were attacked, beaten, trampled, and gassed by state troopers and sheriff's deputies. Many described what they saw as a war scene. The attacks did not end at the bridge. Participants were chased by mounted deputies to the George Washington Carver Homes housing project across from Brown Chapel Church, and the violence continued throughout the night.



Selma Movement leader Amelia Boynton is assisted after being tear-gassed and clubbed to the ground, while tear gas and other fallen marchers cover the route to Montgomery on Bloody Sunday.

Many of the marchers were not able to return to their homes and sought refuge in the First Baptist Church. Even there they were not safe. One survivor of the march, Joanne Bland, director and co-founder of the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute in Selma, told of seeing a deputy throw a young boy into the empty baptismal pool, breaking both his arms. Dr. King, who was still in Atlanta, watched television in disbelief. He decided to ask for national support and sent telegrams urging ministers to join him in Selma on Tuesday, March 9, to stage another effort to march to Montgomery. Thousands of Americans shook off the garments of complacency and put on robes of righteous indignation as they made preparations to travel to Selma. As a show of support for the demonstrators and their cause, cities around the country staged empathy marches.

Meanwhile, Federal Judge Frank M. Johnson issued an injunction halting the scheduled March 9

demonstration until a ruling could be delivered on the constitutionality of the march. Governor Wallace remained resolute that a march from Selma to Montgomery would not take place because it would "disrupt traffic along Highway 80." On Tuesday, March 9, Dr. King led a group of 1,500 protesters to the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. They were again confronted by Alabama law enforcement officers and ordered to turn around. Dr. King bowed his head and asked Rev. Ralph Abnernathy to pray, after which they returned to Brown Chapel Church. "Turn Around Tuesday" was a symbolic march—it showed the governor and the world that the marchers were resolute in their efforts to exercise their First Amendment rights in hopes of securing the right to vote. Later that evening Rev. James Reeb, a white Unitarian-Universalist minister from Boston who came to Selma after hearing the plea from Dr. King, became another casualty when he was attacked and clubbed by white thugs. Despite being rushed 90 miles to a hospital in Birmingham, he died of his injuries two days later.

On March 15, President Lyndon Baines Johnson spoke to the U.S. Congress and the American people of African Americans receiving the right to vote and other rights as citizens. He ended his speech with the words from the song that in many ways had become the Civil Rights Movement anthem, “We Shall Overcome.” On March 19, Judge Johnson lifted the injunction declaring that the enormity of the wrongs inflicted upon African Americans justified the march.

Within two weeks of Bloody Sunday, thousands of Americans from all walks of life—black and white, male and female, Christians and Jews, nuns and priests, factory workers and white-collar workers, college professors and students, housewives and prominent national figures—assembled in Selma to demonstrate in support of their fellow Americans. On Sunday, March 21,1965, with the Federal Government on their side and National Guardsmen ordered to protect them, the demonstrators set out from Selma on their way to Montgomery and into national and international history.

Brown Chapel AME Church, Selma

The marchers averaged between 10 to 12 miles a day. The weather conditions ranged from 28 to 45 degrees Fahrenheit. They walked under sunny skies and in light to pouring rain. Some nights a few of them were able to sleep in tents, but the majority of them endured the cold and slept in the mud. Four hardship-filled days elapsed before the marchers reached Montgomery. On March 24, they reached their final campsite on the grounds of the City of St. Jude, a Catholic hospital and school for blacks within the city limits.

An Alabama guardsman watches the marchers in Lowndes County.

That night entertainers came from all over the country and delivered a concert that many still talk about today. By Thursday, March 25, the number of demonstrators grew to an estimated 25,000 as they marched from the City of St. Jude to the state capitol. This national show of support culminated at the Alabama State Capitol and later, with the support of President Johnson, resulted in

the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The keynote speaker at the state capitol was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was not permitted to set foot on the capitol steps, so a flatbed truck was brought in for him and the other dignitaries to use as a platform for their speeches. The speech Dr. King delivered that day still echoes around the world, encouraging men and women to stand up for their rights no matter the cost.

James Forman, Martin Luther King Jr., C.T. Vivian, and Jesse Douglas Sr. march on the outskirts of Montgomery.

Excerpts from "Our God Is Marching On" speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Montgomery on March 25, 1965:

> *They told us we wouldn't get here. And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies, but all the world today knows that we are here and we are standing before the forces of power in the State of Alabama saying, "We ain't goin' let nobody turn us around."*
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> *And so I plead with you this afternoon as we go ahead: remain committed to nonviolence. Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.*
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> *I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" Somebody's asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?" Somebody's asking, "When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death? How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?"*
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> *I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."*

King speaks to a crowd of 25,000 at the end of the march.

The courage, perseverance, and faith of the marchers continue to inspire people throughout the world. We must never forget that some supporters paid the ultimate sacrifice and gave their lives. One of many who died was Viola Liuzzo, who was struck down by assassins' bullets while helping to transport marchers from Montgomery back to Selma. Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a 26-year-old white student from Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was killed by a part-time Lowndes County deputy sheriff in Hayneville, Alabama, on August 20, 1965. Daniels was shot in the stomach after pushing a black teenage girl out of danger. The legacies of Jimmie Lee Jackson, Viola Liuzzo, Jonathan Myrick Daniels, and Rev. James Reeb live on every time a minority voter goes to the polls and casts a vote.

A marcher protests segregation, his flag held upside-down to signify distress.